# WORLD CHRONICLE

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PROGRAMME: "WORLD CHRONICLE"

GUEST: Mohamed El-Ashry
Consultant on Environment
United Nations Development Programme

JOURNALISTS: Claude Robinson, Inter Press Service
Judith Aita, USIA Press Service
Ian Williams, The Scotsman

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

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SYNOPSIS

Protecting the Earth's Ozone Layer

Mohamed El-Ashry, United Nations Development Programme's Consultant on Environment, and Vice President for Research and Policy Affairs with the World Resources Institute, reaffirms the need for global action to phases out production of CFC's, a class of industrial chemicals that destroy the life-protecting ozone layer in the upper atmosphere. He suggests that public pressure can have an impact on policy makers to take appropriate action.

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VOICE From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is World Chronicle, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's World Chronicle.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** I'm Michael Littlejohns and this is **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

Two United Nations agencies, in collaboration with the World Resources Institute, a leading policy research centre based in Washington D.C., have just released a report entitled **"World Resources 1990-91".** The report includes a new section on the "Greenhouse Index" which ranks countries by their emissions of gases that may lead to global warming. Also new is a discussion of how developing countries could better measure their progress towards sustainable economic growth.

Our guest today, Mohamed El-Ashry of Egypt, is the United Nations Development Programme's consultant on Environment. UNDP is one of the agencies that sponsored the report. Dr. El-Ashry is also Vice President for Research and Policy Affairs with the World Resources Institute. Dr. El-Ashry will be interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Claude Robinson of Inter Press Service; Judith Aita of the USIA Press Service; and Ian Williams of The Scotsman.

For some background information, here's a report from our correspondent, Steve Whitehouse.

**WHITEHOUSE:** All over the world, people tune in to find out what's the weather going to be tomorrow. But more and more, people are asking what's the weather going to be like in the 1990's and beyond.

Computer models are showing that unprecedented climate changes could begin to affect all our lives. The 1980s was the warmest decade of the past century. It included six of the ten warmest years on record.

Modern industrial development has produced more carbon dioxide than the oceans and trees can absorb. Chemicals such as chlorofluorocarbons, widely used as refrigerants and solvents, for insulative foam and propellants in spray cans, are depleting the world's protective ozone layer.

A further consequence of atmospheric pollution is the greenhouse effect. Carbon dioxide released by burning fossil fuels is causing temperatures to rise worldwide.

Unless we stop this process quickly, deserts will spread and crops will be lost. Low lying countries and coastal lands will be flooded. Unique and irreplaceable species of animals and plants will disappear forever.

In 1987, an international agreement was signed to reduce the production and use of chlorofluorocarbons by 50% by the year 2000. Many developing countries that signed the Montreal Protocol have asked for help in converting to more costly substitutes for chlorofluorocarbons.

Industrial nations create most of the present global pollution. They're still the largest consumers of the world's natural resources and the largest waste producers. Yet many poor countries still lack and desperately need the benefits of industrialization and economic development.

To avoid making the same environmentally damaging mistakes, it's vital for developed nations to help finance growth in the Third World and make environmentally sound technology available to them.

It doesn't matter where the carbon dioxide or CFC's are released, whether it's from a northern industrial country or a southern developing one. The atmosphere mixes the pollutants and the damaging effect is worldwide. Concerted international action is urgently needed to help restore the global environment.

**LITTLEJOHNS**: Dr. El-Ashry, how far advanced are we in the production of substitutes for CFCs?

**EL-ASHRY**: Substitutes for the ozone layer depleting CFCs that we have been using for the last several decades have been found and are available for commercial use, the problem is that they are more expensive than the CFCs that they are to replace.

**LITTLEJOHNS**: And are they totally benign as far as the ozone layer is concerned?

**EL-ASHRY**: Not totally but their effects are very small as compared to the existing ones and this would be a step clearly in the right direction till scientists find something that is completely benign.

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**LITTLEJOHNS:** In the footage we've just seen, references were made both to the ozone layer and to the greenhouse effect, what's the difference between the two things?

**EL-ASHRY:** The ozone layer is the shield that protects the earth from the harmful ultra violet radiation, the CFC's break down the composition of that ozone layer and cause more of this ultra violet radiation to get through to the surface of the earth. The greenhouse effect on the other hand is the result of putting heat-trapping gases like carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels, the CFCs themselves act also as heat-trapping gas, and methane, and as a result instead of the solar radiation that comes to the surface of the earth returning back to the outer atmosphere, part of it gets trapped in the lower layer of the atmosphere and causes the temperature to rise just like a greenhouse acts in terms of growing plants, green plants in it.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** You mentioned methane, I read a report the other day that cows are dangerous for the environment because of their production of methane gas. Is that a serious problem?

**EL-ASHRY:** Well, cars are a dangerous ...

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Cows, cows.

**EL-ASHRY:** Cows, oh yes, definitely. Cows, livestock and agricultural practices like rice paddies are the main producers of methane. There isn't really a way to quantify it but people can estimate and multiply and in fact methane is the third major gas responsible for global warming and the greenhouse effect.

**ROBINSON:** Mr. El-Ashry, can we try and establish somewhat the dimensions of the problem. Mr. Sununu, as you probably know the White House point man in the Bush administration and not a great friend of the environmentalists, simply says that what you people are saying is not true, that there is no great danger of warming and the cost of industry putting in the alternatives far outweighs any benefit that could arise. Is he right or is he just off the wall?

**EL-ASHRY:** Well, let's take the two parts of that argument. The first one that there is no problem. Clearly, we know that carbon dioxide has accumulated in the atmosphere and the rate of production has increased threefold in this century alone. Everyone knows the characteristics of carbon dioxide and the chlorofluorocarbons in terms of their heat trapping effect. Clearly there were some uncertainties as to how much of the warming will take place and when because of the role of the oceans, the role of clouds in absorbing some of this heat. The models that the scientists use indicate that the temperature will be increasing by $2^{o}C$-$4^{o}C$ sometime early in the century. Maybe it will not happen, but maybe it will and the question becomes if we wait till it happens, then we really have no recourse in terms of taking action to reverse what has happened, so it becomes a matter of insurance just like in my house I buy insurance against fire. That does not mean that I am expecting the fire to happen next week, but yet I continue to pay my insurance premium. The second part is the question of costs. Costs depends on how you quantify that cost. There are initial efforts that can be taken to slow down that effect of warming in very a cost-effective way and that's in looking at the efficiency in which we use energy and mainly the industrialized countries and countries like the United States which use it less efficiently than many of the industrialized countries in the world.

**ROBINSON:** Yeah, but at the same time, it is that inefficient use of energy and other resources which keeps living standards down and there is practically no way in which you can use energy more efficiently and achieve the results you're talking without really lowering living standards in a country like the United States and taxpayers and voters are not going to put up with that.

**EL-ASHRY:** I don't really see the logic in that. On the contrary, if you raise the efficiency with which energy is being used in the United States you would do a number of things. One of them of course is the environmental benefit that would happen. The second would be to reduce the reliance of the United States on imported oil. Right now because the cost of oil worldwide is low perhaps we don't see the impact but if oil prices go up to $70 a barrel we will see the impact again on the US economically from the importation of oil. And third, improving energy efficiency in the US would improve its competitiveness in the world. Right now, it's having a hard time competing with a country like Japan that's twice as efficient in using its energy as the United States or a country like West Germany that's also twice as efficient. Now, no one can argue that the standard of living of Japan or West Germany is less than the standard of living of the United States.

**ROBINSON:** So Mr. Sununu he's off the wall then?

**EL-ASHRY:** These are your words.

**AITA:** Even though you seem to say that the scientists don't agree on what the scenario will be, is it a strong debate, are scientists very actively arguing about it? I mean, is there a big schism between what the scientists think may happen in the climate?

**EL-ASHRY:** There will always be a debate among scientists on any of these environmental or scientific issues because there always are different schools of thought. People, scientists look at the same information, the same data and reach different conclusions and this is exactly what is happening here because of some of the uncertainties. No one could claim that there is complete agreement or that we know everything about the problem and clearly, scientific research will be needed to learn more about it, but what we know now is enough to start taking action. Now, how much action do we take? Clearly, it will have to be proportionate to the economic ability of the countries that will take the action as well as the level of knowledge that we know as well. So, it is not a matter of jumping head-in first and saying let's eliminate all the use of fossil fuels, let's stop cutting every single tree on the surface of the world, let's not raise cows anymore because they produce methane, it's a matter of what balance of economic development and effects on the environment can we afford to have or to take over the next few years and decades.

**AITA:** Would you recommend say a government stepping in, in the case of let's say industrialized countries, you say that the substitutes for CFCs are expensive. That can be altered by tax incentives for using the alternatives and taxing higher taxes on things that use CFCs which would change the economic viability of them. Is that too drastic or is that a viable way to get things moving?

**EL-ASHRY:** No, it is not too drastic at all. Actually, not only is it viable, but it has already taken place. The United States has put in an excise tax on the use of CFCs that will produce $5 billion. That's one of the surprises that the world had when the US refused to contribute $20 million out of that pot into the deliberations of the Montreal protocol and the negotiations over it.

**ROBINSON:** Having previously agreed to do so I believe?

**EL-ASHRY:** They had agreed previously to do so and everybody was stunned and shocked that the US would back off from that position but that's a viable measure to take for the industrialized countries. Let's not forget that there are two parties to this debate and that's the developing world that have very limited resources and their priorities as far as development and so on far exceed their priority right now to address the global environmental issues, and the industrialized countries who are mainly responsible for causing most of that problem. And it is a global problem. So without international co-operation between North and South, industrialized and developing countries, it's not going to happen.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** The programme is **WORLD CHRONICLE**. Our guest is Mohamed El-Ashry, United Nations Development Programme's Consultant on Environment.

**WILLIAMS:** Accepting the greenhouse effect is a real phenomenon and that it is a global phenomenon, is it necessarily proved that it is a global problem? I've spoken to Scots who've told me that they'd be very very happy to see London under water and I've seen global models that show that the Sahara where a 5°C rise in global temperatures will get monsoon rains. Canada and Siberia, there are lots of people who would think that an extended summer might be a very, very good idea. Is everybody necessarily a loser in this scenario?

**EL-ASHRY:** Not everybody may be a loser in this scenario but the question, again, of the uncertainty is on the rate at which such changes ought to take place. When you have

climatic shifts, at what weight that shift in climate is going to take place and can people cope with that rate of change, whether it is a warming of the real cold regions, increased precipitation in areas that are now dry. We know that increased precipitation could bring about floods -- major floods. Now are the people prepared for the flood protection that could take place there? The other thing is that we are really playing a game here with the earth. As much as scientists can talk about models -- global models -- other models are not capable of predicting exactly what could happen on a region by region scale, let alone one locality versus the other, so it's something to be of world concern because the whole world contributes to it, the whole world will be affected by it and it is a matter of what actions are going to be taken collectively between the different parties in order to get a handle on it.

**WILLIAMS**: One of the problems is it's not everyone is assuming that the consequence is an increase in temperatures due to climatic variations. For instance, if the gulf stream's course were to be then Iceland and Britain, Britain would actually have the climate of Iceland and Northern Europe would become almost uninhabitable but I gather there's a possibility that global warming might actually have effects on the ocean currents that would produce some parts of the world actually being colder now than before.

**EL-ASHRY**: Well, the effects of temperature of course are not just on the solid land. It's everywhere on the globe and it is the oceans that represent or react to the effects of changes in temperature and in turn result in the moderation of such temperatures through the different ocean currents, cold and warm, from one part to the other. And these are some of the details that really scientists have not delved into it yet and

that's why some of those who argue against it think that there are some speculations there. But that's really all we can do when that's all the information that's available now. That's why I said earlier it is important to have more scientific research to understand the implications on regional as well as global scales, as well.

**ROBINSON**: Mr. El-Ashry, earlier you said that the priority of developing countries is to develop and the route that they see before them is the one followed by the industrialized countries. Why should China not have refrigerators and India and Brazil and every other developing country not have all the things that they were told thirty years ago that they should aspire to?

**EL-ASHRY**: I don't think anyone is saying that China and Brazil and India and Bangladesh should not have the same technologies that helped the industrialized world develop in the first place. The question becomes of what type of technology, how efficient that technology is and the problem, just like with the alternative to CFCs is that the new technology will be more expensive than the old, inefficient technology and that gets us really to the question of financing. How do we go about financing development around the world, and that international co-operation, as far as financing technology transfer, is key to the solution of all of these problems, particularly that the impacts go to the developing world, as well as to the developed world.

**ROBINSON**: But from 1979, remember at the Vienna Conference on Technology Transfer, we adopted a huge programme to transfer technology to developing countries and nothing happened with it, so why should anyone in any developing country now who can make some progress using known technologies, why

should someone forego that opportunity in the hope that there will be some new co-operation which we have never had happen over the last twenty years?

**EL-ASHRY:** Well, we have an opportunity in the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development to address these global issues in a way that we have not addressed them before and address the question of international co-operation in a way that has not been addressed before and I think that's going to be a litmus test, a watershed, to test how serious the politicians of the world and the leaders of the world are in terms of getting that international co-operation going and it is not just a matter of our solving global environmental problems but hopefully so that development in the developing world, as well as in the industrialized world, can also go on.

**AITA:** We've been talking about technology transfer and CFCs but you mentioned earlier that growing rice and livestock is a problem in global warming. Am I correct that those gases figure into it? It kind of seems a little frustrating. I mean if we're on such a basic level as that how do you begin to surmount it, or is that it's just such a small portion of it? I mean do these things have to be taken into account? Growing rice seems like such a basic thing.

**EL-ASHRY:** Well, let's look at what contributes to global warming. We have the fossil fuel, the burning of fossil fuels amounts to about 50% of the problem of emissions of carbon dioxide. Then we have deforestation -- somewhere between 20-30% depending on what year we are talking about. In the World Resources report that was mentioned earlier in the opening of the show, the 1987 figures are the highest ever and would result in the deforestation contribution of about 1/3 of the total. Then the rest, which would be about 20-25%, would be the methane

methane and the other gases that are contributing, minor gases that are there. So, when we talk about reducing or influencing the problem, then we talk about the opportunities -- where are the opportunities? And the opportunities clearly, first, are in using the $CO_2$ from the burning of fossil fuel and in slowing down deforestation. Deforestation does not have to take place at the huge rate that it is taking place right now particularly that the effects go really beyond the global warming. They go into soil erosion, they go into the siltation of reservoirs, they impact in terms of biological diversity and the disappearance of species that live in these forests. So that's where the highest priorities really would be for action so it's not a matter of eliminating all human activities that contribute to that.

**WILLIAMS:** With the occurrence of economic fetish for free markets, one of the problems that seems to cross world is that none of the accounting systems, none of the budgeting systems take account for environmental damage. They look at the gross profit and loss, they look at capital formation and depreciation, but nobody's developing an accounting system that says the atmosphere is worth so much, a certain amount of usage of it should be factored into the cost of products, similarly for forests, water. What progress has there been on bringing the economists to bear upon this problem since we are talking about development and this is very much an economist's problem as much as an environmentalist's?

**EL-ASHRY:** Exactly. Actually, the economists have come a long way in looking at the issue of natural resources accounting and a number of methodologies have been developed, which again are reported in the "World Resource Report 1990/1991", and as you described it, you know, we have tended in the past to look at progress or measure our income in terms of

the physical assets and depreciate the physical assets and the capital assets, the man-made assets, and do not consider the depreciation or the depletion of natural resources in that equation. Until we start really addressing that question of depletion and effects on the natural resource assets, we will not be able to go very far and that addresses both the developed as well as the developing world. So you find now the tendency is to talk about the depletion of natural resources in the developing world, but really, the developed world also. You have to look at it in terms of water and air pollution and climate change as well.

**WILLIAMS:** But I understand the United Nations standard accounting system itself doesn't really take these things into consideration?

**EL-ASHRY:** Exactly, and that really is the next step is that the United Nations Statistical Office, which is the one that provides the guidance to all nations of the world for the methods of accounting, has to take a leadership role on that score.

**ROBINSON:** You talked earlier about deforestation and recently the Brazilians have come in for a lot of international what they call Brazil bashing, what other people call something else, but one of the points that they make, the Brazilians make, is that they think that in terms of their own development, they are balancing deforestation with their development requirements and that they should not be asked to cut down on their development in order to provide forestry for trapping gases produced elsewhere in the world. Do they have a point?

**EL-ASHRY:** Well, they have a point, up to a point. First of all, in 1987, it was the highest rate of burning of the forest in the Amazon and the Brazilians themselves recognized that and have passed a number of laws to try to control it and bring it down, and sure enough they have brought it down some in 1988 and 1989. So that's one action they needed to take themselves any way. But in terms of the basic point, it is true countries -- poor countries -- that are indebted and they need to repay the debt, they will have to extract their natural resources and they export it, so when we talk about deforestation for the purpose of global warming or for the purpose of global biological diversity then it brings again the role of the developed -- the rich countries -- who would benefit from preserving these resources in the financial question that would be involved there and that gets us back again into the whole question of international co-operation and whether it's financing or technology transfer or taking common action.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Mr. El-Ashry, do you as a scientist feel that the message is finally getting through to the policy makers and now you are optimistic about the outcome?

**EL-ASHRY:** I think the message is getting through to many policy makers but not to all and the key really is going to be getting the message to the public at large because till the public recognizes that there is a stake in that issue, and their lives and their welfare is at stake, the pressure on the politicians will not be great to act. So we need to do more on the level of public awareness so that the public can bring the pressure that is needed to bear on the politicians.

**LITTLEJOHNS:** Dr. El-Ashry, that's all the time have. Thank you for joining us in this edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

Our guest has been Mohamed El-Ashry, United Nations Development Programme's Consultant on Environment. He was interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Claude Robinson of Inter Press Service; Judith Aita of the USIA Press Service; and Ian Williams of The Scotsman.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE.**

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